

Pitroda power



Papa's pride...
Mr Pitroda with
his daughter
Rajal.
PHOTO: AFP

LEAFING through copies of tabla!, Mr Sam Pitroda looks up and says: "I used to play the tabla when I was young."

These days, he hardly has time to relax. Despite having endured two quadruple bypass surgeries – he now has four stents in his heart – and surviving cancer, the 68-year-old is busy as ever.

He was in Singapore as a speaker at the Global Entrepolis @ Singapore 2010 on Oct 7 and took time off to talk to me about his life, his work and his family on the sidelines of the business summit.

Long before Wipro, TCS and Infosys became the IT icons of India, Mr Pitroda was the poster boy of technology in India in the mid-1980s. Just getting a telephone line in India those days was a big thing but he revolutionised the telecom sector and brought phone booths to almost every nook and corner of the country.

His was a popular face during the then prime minister Rajiv Gandhi's rule. Mr Pitroda was tasked with technology missions related to water, immunisation, literacy, edible oil, telecom and milk production.

"India then was not a producer of vaccines. Recognising that India had the largest number of polio cases, we decided to create vaccine production technology. Today, India is the largest producer of vaccines in the world," says the man who sports long white hair and a goatee that is dyed black.

"The fact is that we planted the seeds for these things in the 1980s. However, a lot of these things take 20 years. What we started in telecom took 20 years but people want quick results. I always say that nation building is very different from compa-

ny building. Building a company is much quicker, building a nation is a very slow process and takes generations."

Mr Pitroda, who is based in Chicago, had been wooed back to India in the 1980s by the Congress government. He was very close to Mr Gandhi and even gave up his US citizenship to be in India. But after 11 years, he suffered a heart attack and, with the BJP taking over the government, he returned to the US "as a tourist".

"I had also run out of money. So I went back and rebuilt my life. Now that the children are grown up, I am once again engaged in India," says Mr Pitroda, whose son Salil is 35 and daughter Rajal is 32.

He says he does not look at his personal achievements. But his children, he admits, give him great satisfaction.



"I have two of the most wonderful kids you can think of. My son went to MIT, Harvard and lives in New York. He is an investment banker, married to a doctor. I have a daughter who went to Michigan and is in Hollywood, involved with marketing and distribution of movies. I have had a great married life for close to 45 years. What else do you want? I am a happy man. I have no complaints."

Saying this, he fishes out his wallet and shows me a black-and-white photograph of his wife Anu, taken before they got married. She has been his tower of strength and often travels with him. They have known each other for a long time, even before Mr Pitroda, bitten by the US bug, left for that country in 1964 and became a well-known entrepreneur who went on to hold nearly 100 patents in the tech field.

It was a long journey for the man who

SAM PITRODA
Adviser to India's
prime minister
(public information
infrastructure and
innovations)

◆ **Whether your GDP growth is 8 per cent or 10 per cent doesn't mean anything. But can you provide them with basic necessities like water, sanitation, food, security, good living?**

– Mr Pitroda, who says he more concerned about ensuring a good life for the majority of the people in India

started life in a remote village in Orissa. He is the third of eight children, all delivered at home because the village did not have a doctor or even a pharmacy. As there was no school either, his father – a Gujarati who had moved to that village in the 1930s – sent him to Gujarat to study in a school started by Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. He went on to finish his master's in physics from Baroda's Maharaja Sayajirao University.

"I was the first one to graduate from my family and, one fine day, saw in the newspapers that Kennedy has decided to send man to the moon. You are 20 years old, you are young and you are stupid. And so I said I want to go to America. I didn't have money. I got some money from some people. The Orissa government gave me Rs3,000 to buy a ticket. I took a boat from Mumbai to Genoa and from there took a train to London. From there I flew to New York and then took a bus to Chicago," recalls Mr Pitroda of his journey to the US.

Once there, he went on to do his master's in electrical engineering in Illinois. Soon, he could afford to get Anu over and they got married in 1966. He also took his entire family over to the US.

"That was the way to get out of poverty in the 1960s and 1970s and going to America was a big thing. Today it would be different," says the man who these days shuttles between the US and India, where he holds the rank of a Cabinet minister as the PM's adviser.

As he had worked closely with the late Mr Rajiv Gandhi, I ask him for his impressions of Mr Gandhi's son Rahul.

"Rahul is his own man. He is building his own team. People like me are too old... I talk to him on and off and I find him very capable and very analytical. He takes his own time, he listens to everybody and takes his own decisions," says Mr Pitroda, who is in the process of setting up a billion dollar fund for innovation in India.

Predominantly a private fund, with the government putting in a little seed capital, its aim is to invest along with other funds in innovations that help people at the bottom of the pyramid in sustainability, health, education and other areas.

That brought us to the topic of India's economic growth. And Mr Pitroda is not impressed with growth numbers.

"All this talk of GDP, GNP and per capita income don't mean much to me. The point is do we provide a proper standard of living to a large number of people in India? That is the fundamental challenge. Whether your GDP growth is 8 per cent or 10 per cent doesn't mean anything. But can you provide them with basic necessities like water, sanitation, food, security, good living?" he asks.

"Money is one aspect of life but there is lot more to Indian life that I have learnt now. Indian life is all about emotional connections. I can meet you and become your friend in five minutes. I can't do that with a Westerner. The primary bond only comes through Indian culture. I think even if there is less income in India, the quality of life in India is much better perhaps."

Having said that, Mr Pitroda pulls out a slip of paper from his coat pocket to check his schedule. He has a lunch appointment and then a public appearance. We shake hands and part, leaving me wondering whether the man I admired in my youth had become my friend. I had, after all, spent more than half an hour with him.

➔ patrickj@sph.com.sg